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THE OHIO VALLEY IN THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE WAR OF 1812

The war of 1812 is one of the most unsatisfactory episodes in American history. It was unpopular with a large part of the people of the United States and was not desired by the British. Its course was marked by disastrous and even disgraceful defeats as well as by brilliant victories, some of them quite undeserved. Its immediate outcome and the treaty of peace which brought it to an end were singularly indecisive. Had there been means of rapid communication in 1814 the last battle which occurred would not have been fought; had they existed in 1812 there might have been no war at all.

The efforts of historical writers in the United States to explain the significance of the war have been as unsatisfactory as the war itself. A widely accepted version that it was a "second war for independence" distorts both its inception and its results. There is no evidence whatever that Great Britain sought to reconquer the United States, nor did the war make us either more dependent upon Great Britain or less dependent than we were before save, perhaps, indirectly and in ways unforeseen on either side. Those who regard it wholly as a struggle to maintain the rights of American commerce and the dignity of American citizenship on the sea ignore the chronology of events. As Henry Adams pertinently remarks, "A nation which had submitted to robbery and violence in 1805, in 1807, in 1809, could not readily lash itself into rage in 1811 when it had no new grievance to allege; nor could the public feel earnest in maintaining national honor, for every one admitted that the nation had sacrificed its honor, and must fight to regain it. Yet what honor was to be hoped from a war which required continued submission to one robber as the price of resistance to another?"¹ The impulse to look elsewhere than to the outrages which England perpetrated

¹ Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America* (New York, 1889-1891), 6: 113.

on the ships and sailors of the United States for the decisive cause of the war is strengthened by the notorious fact that New England, which more than any other part of the country was vitally interested in those ships and sailors, furnished the strongest opposition to the war. Adams himself, the most distinguished historian who has written upon the period, seems to attribute the war chiefly to the fact that "the youthful energy of the nation which had at last come to its strength under the shelter of Jefferson's peaceful rule, cried out against the cowardice of further submission, and insisted on fighting if only to restore its own self-respect."² This explanation, however, seems as vague as it is ironical, and leads one to ask whether "the youthful energy of the nation" did not have some more definite end in view than merely to strike out blindly in the *mélée* to show that it could fight.

The best clue to the understanding of the war of 1812 is to be found in the situation existing in the Ohio valley. That section of the country, aided by elements in the south, virtually brought on the war. It did so on account of a crisis which culminated, not in 1807 as did our maritime grievances against England, but in 1811 and 1812, in the months which really matured the decision to appeal to arms. And in appealing to arms it had a perfectly clear and intelligible aim. That aim was nothing other than the conquest of Canada.

This view of the matter is not uncommon among Canadian writers, but, for the most part, they fail to make clear the underlying motives involved and to show how they worked out. By underestimating the maritime grievances of the United States, which undoubtedly paved the way for the triumph of the aggressive western element in the national councils, by conceiving the war as an unprovoked imperialistic attack on the part of the United States, and by magnifying the internal results of the war upon Canada, national tradition north of the border sometimes exalts it into the unmerited position of being the "making of Canada."³ As a matter of fact, it had almost no effect upon the institutions of Canada and, far from being an unprovoked imperialistic attack upon the Canadians, it was an attempt of the

² Adams, *History of the United States*, 6: 115

³ Arthur G. Bradley, *The making of Canada* (New York, 1908).

United States to solve a serious problem of the northwest. The failure of the attempt in its original form need not obscure the fact that the war, and constructive statesmanship in the ensuing years, actually did solve the problem.

The project of the conquest of Canada is manifest in the debate in the house of representatives upon the belligerent report of the committee on foreign relations presented on November 29, 1811.⁴ Taking into account the natural tendency of public speakers to represent all wars they favor as defensive and to conceal schemes of aggression as likely both to create a public reaction and to expose their plans to the enemy, it is surprising to see how frankly the war party alluded to the conquest of Canada as the definite gain to be expected from a war with England. Peter B. Porter, chairman of the committee on foreign relations, suggested as possible "the destruction of British fisheries, of British commerce with America and the West Indies, and the conquest of Canada. 'By carrying on such a war at the public expense on land, and by individual enterprise at sea, we should be able in a short time to remunerate ourselves ten-fold for all the spoliation she [England] had committed on our commerce.'"⁵ Felix Grundy, of Tennessee, declared, "This war, if carried on successfully, will have its advantages. We shall drive the British from our continent. I am willing to receive the Canadians as adopted brethren."⁶ "I should not wish to extend the boundary of the United States by war," remarked Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky, "if Great Britain would leave us to the quiet enjoyment of independence; but considering her deadly and implacable enmity, and her continued hostilities, I shall never die contented until I see her expulsion from North America, and the territories incorporated with the United States."⁷ Henry Clay, speaker of the house, in the committee of the whole outlined a plan for the invasion of Canada and for the distribution of troops there. No wonder that John Randolph complained, "Ever since the report of the Committee on Foreign

⁴ A lively and well-balanced account of this discussion is given in Adams, *History of the United States*, 6: 132 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6: 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6: 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6: 142.

Relations came into the House, we have heard but one word,—like the Whippoorwill, but one monotonous tone,—Canada, Canada, Canada.”⁸

Most of the speakers quoted came from the Ohio valley. Their utterances represented the sentiments of their constituencies. Some, indeed, had been sent to congress in the interests of the pro-war element. Occasional articles in the western papers had been urging the possibility and the desirability of getting possession of Canada.⁹ In Vincennes, the capital of Indiana territory, the fourth of July was celebrated in 1808 with a military display and a banquet at which Governor Harrison presided; among the toasts drunk, the following was conspicuous: “Peace with Great Britain if she will have peace—if not, Huzza for Canada.”¹⁰

In explanation of the sentiment in favor of the conquest of Canada, it must be remembered that thirty-five years earlier the continental congress had hoped that the Canadians would join in the revolution and had conducted a long campaign for the “fourteenth colony.”¹¹ George Rogers Clark, also, had had lively hopes of pressing home his conquest of the northwest with a campaign against the British by way of the Wabash, the Maumee, Detroit, and Canada.¹² As late as 1812 there were doubtless many in the United States who, ignorant of the intense loyalist sentiment promoted by refugees from the very revolution which had sought to win Canada and failed, thought of the invasion of Canada not as a conquest but as a liberation. Certainly there was little, if any, hostility to the citizens of Canada; the primary consideration was the destruction of the government of Great Britain in Canada.¹³ Joined with this was the expectation of the union of the continent, north of Mexico, in a great, free republic.

It was not merely the dream of a greater republic, however,

⁸ Adams, *History of the United States*, 6: 145.

⁹ See for example the *Western Sun*, published at Vincennes, Indiana, January 18, 25, February 22, 1812.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1808.

¹¹ Justin H. Smith, *Our struggle for the fourteenth colony: Canada and the American revolution* (New York, 1907).

¹² George Roger Clark papers, edited by James A. James (*Illinois historical collections*, volume 8—Springfield, 1912), 402 ff., 485 ff.

¹³ See for example the speeches of Grundy and Johnson quoted above.

that stirred the inhabitants of the Ohio valley in the years preceding 1812. They had more practical and pressing matters to think of. The Indians were an ever-present menace which at any moment might set the whole frontier in a blaze, and back of the Indians the westerners saw the English in Canada.

The experience of the generation then in control of the Ohio valley was once voiced by Felix Grundy in the United States senate: "I was too young to participate in these [earliest] dangers and difficulties, but I can remember when death was in almost every bush, and every thicket concealed an ambuscade. If I am asked to trace my memory back, and name the first indelible impression it received, it would be the sight of my oldest brother bleeding and dying under the wounds inflicted by the tomahawk and the scalping knife. Another, and another, went in the same way! I have seen a widowed mother plundered of her whole property in a single night: from affluence and ease reduced to labor with her own hands to support and educate her last and favorite son — him who now addresses you. Sir, the ancient sufferings of the West were great."¹⁴ That the sufferings of the Indians were even greater these men, of course, did not take into account; nor did they care to stop and reckon up the balance of right and wrong from the Indians' point of view. They were determined to hold the land upon which they had settled and to acquire possession of ever more and more. Their own advance seemed to them to be the natural order and the law of their life; the stealthy, deadly warfare of the Indians was a shadow across their path, creating a combination of fear and ferocity unintelligible to those whose lives and households are not in constant peril. Their only way out was to secure title to additional tracts of land by some form of purchase, make resistance hopeless for the Indians, and shove them on farther west and north.

The west, however, was firmly persuaded that the Indians north of the Ohio were receiving support from Canada and that confidence in this support might at any time precipitate a terrible war on the Indiana frontier. It was notorious that the In-

¹⁴ James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1861), 1: 140, quoted from the *Democratic review*, 3: 162.

dians had counted the English as their allies in the last preceding war, virtually ended by Wayne's victory at Fallen Timbers in the immediate neighborhood of an English fort.¹⁵ There was considerable evidence that the same situation prevailed in 1810, 1811, and 1812. The Hudson's Bay company, "the great company" as it was called on the frontier, carried on an active trade with the tribes in Indiana territory as well as with those north of the Great lakes. From Malden, across the river from Detroit, Indians came back with goods for which furs had been exchanged, and also with gifts and firearms. Warriors in Indiana territory were known to possess quantities of guns and ammunition, most of which were supposed to have come from Canada. After the battle of Tippecanoe, as after that of Fallen Timbers, British weapons were found, this time in the village abandoned by the Prophet's followers. Reports to the above effect circulated freely in the Ohio valley and were forwarded to Washington; they were universally believed and doubtless often exaggerated.¹⁶

British officials denied that they encouraged the Indians in their hostility to the citizens or the government of the United States. Sir James Craig, the military governor-in-chief and commander in Canada, 1807-1811, states that his exertions had constantly been directed to prevent a rupture between the Indians and the United States. He also communicated with J. P. Morier, the British *chargé d'affaires* at Washington, telling him of the hostile feeling among the Indians and giving him authority on his behalf to warn the United States of the probability of an Indian outbreak. That in 1811 government officials in Canada made sincere efforts to prevent the outbreak of an Indian war in Indiana territory must be accepted as an historical fact.¹⁷

It seems certain, none the less, that much of the moral support,

¹⁵ Report of Major General Anthony Wayne to the secretary of war, August 28, 1794, *American state papers: Indian affairs*, 1: 491. See also report of December 17, 1794, *ibid.*, 1: 525.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 797 ff., especially 799, 776 ff.; *Annals of the west*, compiled by James Handasyd Perkins, published by James R. Albach (Cincinnati, 1846), 511.

¹⁷ *American state papers: foreign relations*, 3: 453, 462; William Kingsford, *The history of Canada* (Toronto, 1887-1898), 8: 78; *Annals of the west*, 511; *Documents relating to the invasion of Canada and the surrender of Detroit, 1812*, edited by Ernest A. Cruikshank (*Publications of the Canadian archives*, number 7 — Ottawa,

the guidance, and the supplies for Tecumseh's movement came from Canada. If the British officials tried to prevent an Indian war south of the boundary in 1811, so did Tecumseh, for, as he naively showed at Vincennes, he wanted to postpone all action till the completion of a confederacy which should include the southern Indians; nothing could have been further from his desire than the battle at Tippecanoe.¹⁸ The Indians knew of the friction between the United States and Great Britain and of the repeated occasions after 1805 when war seemed imminent between the two powers. To avoid Indian warfare in the Ohio valley until the greater conflict broke out and then to throw the combined strength of the northern and the southern Indians and the British against the United States was a policy dictated to all three by the most elementary common sense. Tecumseh's attempts to carry out such a plan entitles him to respect; the proposal of any other policy by an English official in Canada would have been a sign of either impractical humanitarianism or lack of intelligence—in any case, of incompetency. The understanding between the English and the northern Indians, and the chief obstacle in its successful execution—the danger of a premature and regrettable Indian outbreak—are alike indicated by the doubt expressed on February 27, 1811, by Isaac Brock, administrator of Upper Canada, of the effectiveness of "our cold attempt to dissuade [the Indians from making war] after giving such manifest indications of a contrary sentiment by the liberal quantity of military stores with which they were dismissed."¹⁹

The indignation of the inhabitants of the Ohio valley at the alliance between the British in Canada and the Indians was as inevitable as the alliance itself. With their acute consciousness of what an Indian war meant to them, they were even less in-

1912); Lady Matilda Edgar, *General Brock* (*Makers of Canada*, volume 9—Toronto, 1910), 149 ff., 175 ff.; Ferdinand B. Tupper, *Life and correspondence of Major General Sir Isaac Brock* (London, 1845), 79.

¹⁸ Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1915-1919), 1: 185.

¹⁹ Tupper, *Life and correspondence of Major General Sir Isaac Brock*, 80. Brock also wrote, in the letter quoted, "I lament to think that the Indians retired from the council, in which they declared their resolution of going to war, with a full conviction that, although they could not look for active coöperation on our part, yet they might rely with confidence upon receiving from us every requisite of war."

clined to look at things from the Canadian than from the Indian point of view. They officially urged the Indians to remain neutral in case of a war between England and the United States,²⁰ a well-intentioned piece of advice, doubtless, but one which the Indians could not adopt without giving up their only hope of successful defense, and one which, in the event mentioned, it would be utterly impossible for them to carry out. With far greater depth of feeling the Ohio valley thought that the English in Canada should keep hands off while the Indians in the northwest were being disposed of. It was incensed that the racial solidarity of the whites against the Indians should not be maintained, even though it involved the surrender by the Canadian officials of their most potent weapon against the expected hostility and probable military superiority of the United States. That of two warring civilized communities one should expect the other to forego the advantage of an alliance with savages is as natural on the one side as the fulfillment of the expectation is impossible on the other. As a matter of fact neither British officials nor Canadians wanted war with the United States; they had nothing to gain by it, and might lose much. But in grooming the Indians for a probable, even though undesired war, they were exercising the most natural and justifiable foresight. This in turn only strengthened the feeling in the United States that the conquest of Canada was necessary to the security of the northwestern frontier.

How the policy of the national government under Jefferson and Madison to extinguish Indian titles by successive purchases of land for future sale to settlers, and the execution of that policy in Indiana territory by Governor William Henry Harrison in the face of the counter-efforts of Tecumseh, led to an intensely strained Indian situation in 1811; how the vague attitude of the war department and its half-way measures and instructions left Harrison uncertain what to do, until circumstances and the pressure of public opinion at Vincennes led him to make a hesitant advance in force into newly purchased land; how, when he finally reached the neighborhood of the Indian village of Prophetstown, the storm center, the difficult decision between peace and war

²⁰ Letter of William Hull to the secretary of war, November, 1807, *American state papers: Indian affairs*, 1: 745.

was taken out of his embarrassed hands by rash leaders among the Indians who threw to the winds the larger plans of the absent Tecumseh and made a night attack upon the camp of the whites on the Tippecanoe—all this has been detailed so fully by others that it need not be described here. The wild onslaught in the early morning (November 7, 1811) nearly succeeded, but the governor and his troops, on the whole, acquitted themselves well and beat back the Indians. The losses, however, were heavy and the army spent twenty-four anxious hours on guard in its camp. Then Harrison destroyed the abandoned village of the Indians and returned unopposed to his base further south, though the army suffered sorely from the loss of most of its supplies. Such was the action which Tecumseh, on his return from his visit to the southern Indians, deprecated and minimized in his partially successful attempt to prevent the immediate continuation of hostilities.²¹ Some Canadian writers take the same view; one historian has even maintained that “General Harrison was surprised and defeated at Tippecanoe near Vincennes with the loss of nearly a fifth of his force.”²² In the United States, though Harrison’s enemies made his conduct of the campaign and the battle the subject of bitter attacks, contemporary opinion and, for the most part, subsequent writers hailed the battle as an “important victory.”

Harrison, however, did not have the means to follow up the battle of Tippecanoe with adequate military occupation of the frontier, nor did the national government take the vigorous measures it unquestionably should have taken. Tecumseh’s plans also had gone awry and throughout 1812 Indian raids harried the frontier and threw the inhabitants of Indiana into great distress.²³ “We were in fine spirits,” writes a settler in the

²¹ For the campaign and the battle of Tippecanoe see Adams, *History of the United States*, 6: 90 ff.; Esarey, *History of Indiana*, 1: 181 ff.; Homer J. Webster, “William Henry Harrison’s administration of Indiana Territory,” in *Indiana historical society publications*, 4: 251 ff.; John B. Dillon, *History of Indiana from its earliest explorations by Europeans to the close of the territorial government in 1816, comprehending a history of the discovery, settlement, and civil and military affairs of the territory of the U. S. northwest of the river Ohio, and a general view of the progress of public affairs in Indiana, from 1816 to 1856* . . . (Indianapolis, 1859), 418 ff.

²² Bradley, *The making of Canada*, 282.

²³ *American state papers: Indian affairs*, 1: 798 ff.

Whitewater valley in eastern Indiana, "until the battle was fought at Tippecanoe by General Harrison and the Indians. After that, we lived in continual fear; . . . we were then few in numbers and completely in the power of the enemy."²⁴ Yet the battle had given the west a sense of action and a taste of victory; the Indian depredations which ensued increased the demand for a war which would destroy forever the fighting force of the Indians and the power of the English in Canada to support them.

The universal determination of the west to safeguard its frontier by the conquest of Canada was the one clean-cut factor in the confused situation out of which came the war with England. It turned the scale when the balance might otherwise have hung even between grievances against England and indignities suffered from Napoleon. It won the day for war measures at a time when there was much to indicate that patience and endurance for a little while longer would end our other troubles.

The progress and the outcome of the war belied the expectations of Henry Clay and others who looked for an easy victory. The "conquest of Canada" proved a fiasco. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why it sometimes receives scant recognition as a motive of the war. But the demand of the Ohio valley for security of its frontier was fulfilled by two developments: first, the losses inflicted upon the Indians during the war, and second, the limitation of armaments along the United States-Canadian boundary after the treaty of peace.

The Indians, as had been foreseen on both sides, proved a terrible and an effective ally of Great Britain. But the war broke their strength and deprived them of their greatest leader. Though we are not concerned in this discussion with the southern Indians and the Florida boundary, the crushing defeats inflicted upon the Indians in the old southwest were among the most important events of the time. In the northwest single engagements probably played a less important part than the general demoralization of the Indians and the destruction of food supplies. These, added to the ever-present hardships and uncertainties of

²⁴ Mrs. Rebecca Julian, in Andrew W. Young, *History of Wayne county, Indiana, from its first settlement to the present time; with numerous biographical and family sketches . . .* (Cincinnati, 1872), 66.

Indian life, played havoc. Moreover, the Indians who remained south of the Great lakes at the close of the war no longer got support from Canada. The demand that a region between the Ohio and the Great lakes be set aside as an Indian dominion under the guardianship of the English was presented to the American commission in the peace negotiations, but was not entertained by them and was dropped without the consideration of any substitute provision save amnesty for actions during the war.²⁵ Only two alternatives were left to the Indians of the northwest: migration to Canada, where some of them were provided for, or submission to the United States government. The frontier east of the Mississippi was never again seriously endangered by them.

It is conceivable that the revolution and the war of 1812 might have been only the beginning of a series of boundary conflicts of the European type between the United States and the British empire in Canada. That this has not been the case is due in part to the extraordinary fact that statesmen on both sides correctly interpreted this phase of the war of 1812. When John Quincy Adams, United States minister at London, sent word that England was contemplating an increase of her naval force on the lakes traversed by the boundary line, the secretary of state, James Monroe, wrote (November 16, 1815) that President Madison authorized Adams to propose a mutual limitation of armament. After several conferences with Lord Castlereagh, Adams submitted to him this note (March 21, 1816) which deserves to rank with our most famous state papers:

It is the sincere wish and, so far as depends upon them, the determined intention of the American Government, that the peace so happily restored between the two countries should be cemented by every suitable measure of conciliation and by mutual reliance upon good faith far better adapted to the maintenance of national harmony than jealous and exasperating defiance of complete armor. . . . The increase of naval armaments on one side upon the lakes, during peace, will necessitate the like increase on the other, and besides causing an aggravation of useless expense to both parties must operate as a continual stimulus of suspicion and of ill will. . . . The moral and political tendency of such a system must be to war and not to

²⁵ Adams, *History of the United States*, 8: 268, 9: 18 ff.

peace. The American Government proposes actually to reduce to the same extent, all naval armaments upon these lakes. The degree to which they shall be reduced is left at the option of Great Britain. The greater the reduction, the more acceptable it will be to the President of the United States; and most acceptable of all, should it be agreed to maintain, on either side, during the peace, no other force than such as may be necessary for the collection of the revenue.²⁶

Later, the British minister at Washington, Charles Bagot, was given authority to conclude such an agreement with the government of the United States. This was done through an exchange of notes between Bagot and Richard Rush, the acting secretary of state (April 28-29, 1817). It was specified that the naval force to be maintained by each power upon the lakes should be confined to one vessel on Lake Ontario carrying one eighteen-pound cannon, two such vessels on the upper Great lakes, and one on Lake Champlain. At President Monroe's instance, this agreement was approved by the United States senate on April 16, 1818. It was then formally proclaimed by the president under date of April 28, 1818,²⁷ and in spirit has been observed by both countries ever since. The attitude thus adopted in naval armament has prevailed in military armament also, and the boundary which promoted war in 1812 has helped to promote more than a hundred years of peace by its challenge to reliance upon good will and good faith.

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²⁶ See *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, edited by Worthington C. Ford (New York, 1913-1917), 5: 498 ff. for similar statements of Adams.

²⁷ James D. Richardson, *A compilation of the messages and papers of the presidents, 1789-1897* (*House miscellaneous documents*, 53 congress, 2 session, volumes 36-46 — Washington, 1895-1896), 2: 36. A full account of the agreement and of the correspondence concerning it, as well as of its subsequent history, with ample quotation of documents, was printed in the "Report of the Honorable John W. Foster, secretary of state, in response to senate resolution of April 11, 1892, relative to the agreement between the United States and Great Britain concerning the naval forces to be maintained on the Great lakes," *Senate executive documents*, 52 congress, 2 session, no. 9 (December 7, 1892). This document, with an introduction by James Brown Scott, has been published by the Carnegie endowment for international peace as Pamphlet number 2, *Limitation of armament on the Great lakes* (Washington, 1914).